CHICAGO SINAI CONGREGATION DEDICATION

September 26, 1997

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The telephone call I received and the discussion and decision it precipitated turned out to be one of the most interesting and important in my ministry. I had just arrived in Chicago to begin my new work at Fourth Presbyterian Church. The call was from Rabbi Howard Berman of Chicago Sinai Congregation in Hyde Park inquiring whether Fourth Presbyterian Church might have any available space on Friday evenings for a service. Some of Rabbi Berman's congregation lived in our neighborhood and it would, he said, be a great convenience to them if they could attend a Sabbath service here.

In the course of that conversation, I found a new friend, a brother, a kind of instant vocational rapport that has continued happily in friendship with Michael Sternfield as well.

Well – Fourth Presbyterian Church had never done anything quite like that before. Presbyterians are an orderly and deliberate people. We don't do anything quickly so it took a while. Our officers heard the proposal and decided that it was a good idea and since that time it has been our privilege to welcome you in our building and our chapel on a regular basis and in our sanctuary for your high and important holidays.

It has been an important relationship for us, expressing eloquently the common historical, spiritual and theological ground upon which Jews and Christians stand, or try to stand, with varying degrees of success.

We have valued the relationship. Our congregation has loved the very gracious gesture of a gift of flowers for our Sunday service near the Fourth of July from your congregation to ours. It is to express your gratitude the nice note always says – but I always knew it as a symbol of the precious heritage of liberty which we share and which guarantees to all of us our right to assemble, to worship, to teach and to proclaim our faith in the free market of ideas.

And so it is my first and most important duty to bring you the greetings of the officers, staff and members of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, our congratulations on the completion of this handsome new facility, and our sincere and heartfelt prayer for God's blessing on this place and on your ministry here in all the days ahead.

I am deeply honored to have been invited to speak this evening. You got me into the *Inc.* column this morning, a first for me. My stock has never been higher. I was in *Inc.* That's where we find out what Dennis Rodman and George Clooney did last night. One of my sons called me from New York and said, "Dad, you're in *Inc.* Aren't the Rabbis a little miffed?"

You may not know this, but we Protestant preachers have been known to go on a bit actually, when we're invited to speak, a phenomenon I'm sure your distinguished Rabbis, Berman and Sternfield, avoid.

I love the story about the two young boys – one Jewish, the other Presbyterian, who were good friends. One day they began to talk about their religions and they came up with a plan to visit one another's religious services. First they went to a Sabbath service at the Synagogue. Afterward, the Jewish boy showed his Presbyterian pal around and explained the Ark and the scrolls and all the wonderful symbolism and traditions. And then they went together to the Presbyterian service on Sunday morning. Presbyterian worship services are pretty simple, no fancy horns, no incense or bells, just hymns, scripture, prayers, sermon, offering, benediction. After the service, the Presbyterian boy asked if his Jewish friend had any questions.

"Not really," the boy said. "It all seemed pretty clear. One thing, though: just before he started to talk, the minister reached under his robe and pulled out a pocket watch and wound it and placed it on the pulpit. What did that mean?"

"Oh," said the Presbyterian, "he puts that watch up there every Sunday and it doesn't mean a darn thing."

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What we are doing this evening is very important and unique. In fact, I'd propose that this gathering may be the most important event in the city tonight. Thank you for inviting the ecumenical community to celebrate this holy occasion with you.

Last April I was in Vukovar – which used to be Croatia and is now Sector E, a strip of land claimed by both Serbians and Croatians. I was there representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and never was I more grateful for my country and its tradition of equal justice and separation of church and state, its ideal of equal treatment of all religions and its nurturing of a community of common ground and affection, imperfect as it is, which holds us all together and transcends our particular ideology, dogma, ethnicity, race. Vukover is where the UN Command Post is, headquarters for troops from Pakistan, Ukraine, Poland. A U.S. Air Force Reserve General, Jacques Klein, is the Commanding Officer.

When the Serbian army attacked Vukover, the bombardment specifically targeted public buildings: libraries, schools, churches. The Croatian army counter-attacked. In that part of the world, Serbian orthodox Christian fanatics target Roman Catholic churches and Muslim mosques: Roman Catholic fanatics retaliate against Orthodox Cathedrals. Reformed Christians are not prominently involved, but as Northern Ireland attests, only because there aren't very many of us.

I will not forget our meeting with General Klein. "When will this end?" we asked and his answer was chilling. "This is about centuries of resentment and hatred. It's about land, and nationalism and religion."

"I'm an Armenian Christian," he went on. "I figured the one thing the Serbs and Croats have in common is that they're Christian. So I figured we'd start there. I went to the clergy and asked them to schedule a joint Community Easter service. I said the U. N. would pay for it, provide a tent. But I couldn't even get them to talk about it. So it didn't happen. To tell the truth, religion doesn't help around here and often makes things a lot worse."

So what we are doing this evening – my being here is important. It says a critical word about who we are and what our community is and the role religion can play in its health and well-being.

One of our biblical scholars, Walter Brueggemann, says that one of the gifts Judaism gives Christianity is "Judaism always reminds Christianity that faith is not private spirituality – a personal ticket to heaven." Judaism reminds Christianity that "communion with God cannot be celebrated without attention to the nature of the community. Religious hungers in Israel never preclude justice questions. Indeed, it is through the question of justice that communion is mediated."

Two weeks ago, Michael and Howard gave me a private tour of this wonderful building. And even though I loved what I saw and listened to their brave confidence that all would be in place by tonight, I confess that was not at all certain that it would all be finished. What touched me most deeply were the inscriptions over our heads … etched here in the sanctuary – the heart of the community – deeply in the very stones of the building,

> Proclaim Liberty
> Justice, Justice you shall pursue
> That which is hateful to you, to not do
> to others
> Love your neighbor as yourself.

Michael Lerner, philosopher, publisher, psychologist, disciple of the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great scholarly and prophetic voices of this century, observes that people are desperate for hope and more than anything want meaning and purpose for their lives. In his brilliant book, *The Politics of Meaning*, Lerner says, "We hunger for communities of meaning that can transcend the individualism and selfishness that we see around us." [p. 4]

Lerner and many others observe and document the loss of community, the celebration of the individual, autonomous, successful, wrapped tightly in a cocoon of expensive acquisitions, living in splendid isolation from other people, untouched by – unfazed by the human condition, riding in cars with darkened windows, living in gated communities.

It's terrible for our souls, Michael Lerner says – all this turning away from one another – and it's bad for our mental and physical health.

So here we are, religious communities who do stand together with respect and affection for one another, on common ground. Here we are in the middle of one of the most extraordinary urban environments in the world.

Our task and our great privilege is to stand as a reminder of the holy – the transcendent in the midst of life. Our task and our mission is to reach out to the ones who are overlooked, forgotten, passed by – the homeless, the alone, the children at Cabrini, the despondent. And our task and privilege is to be a reminder to the busy, affluent and successful thousands who hurry past our front doors, that we are all in this together and that our Creator has made us one family, brothers and sisters.

I love the way Michael Lerner puts it,

> "I am calling for a politics of the image of God; an attempt to reconstruct the world in a way that really takes seriously the uniqueness and preciousness of every human being and our connection to a higher ethical and spiritual purpose that gives meaning to our lives."

We share that. We are messianic people who believe that the one God of all humankind has a will and an intent and that it has everything in the world to do with a reign of peace and justice and wholeness and happiness: a time when children play safely in the streets and the elders sit securely and talk with one another, a state of being for which there is no lovelier word in any language than 'shalom'.

"What life have you if you have not life in community?" T.S. Eliot asked, "What life have you if you have not life together?"

And answered – eloquently, "There is no life that is not in community and no community not lived in praise to God."

You say that gorgeously – right on the front of your beautiful new building as it has been inscribed on the facade of every Sinai Temple throughout your history.

> *"My House shall be a House of Prayer for all People."*

Thank you for saying that in this community.

Thank you for beginning your life in this wonderful new home by inviting all your neighbors in to celebrate with you.

Thank you for inviting a Presbyterian into your pulpit.

Thanks be to God for all you have been, all you are, and all you shall be.

God bless this place. God bless you in all the days ahead.